

HOWARD COUNTY CONSERVANCY

TESTIMONY ON COUNCIL BILL NO. 55-2010 (ZRA-117) December 20, 2010

Good evening. My name is Woody Merkle. I reside at 1940 Woodstock Road, Woodstock, MD.

I am a volunteer naturalist and Board Member for the Howard County Conservancy. I am here tonight testifying on behalf of the Conservancy in support of passage of Bill No. 55-2010.

The Howard County Conservancy is a local, non-profit environmental education center and land trust located at Mt. Pleasant in Woodstock. Mt. Pleasant is a 232 acre farm donated to the citizens of Howard County by Frances and Ruth Brown, who were two life-long residents of the county. The Conservancy is privileged to be the steward of Mt. Pleasant and offers a wide range of environmental programs, events and activities for children and adults.

Alice Parks and Nancy Perkins maintain several honeybee colonies at Mt. Pleasant for the Howard County Beekeepers Association. We have had honey bee colonies at Mt. Pleasant since 1997. Typically we have 3 or 4 colonies but have had as many as 7 colonies on the property. The colonies are located directly adjacent to the trailhead for our woodland hiking trails. A side trail allows direct access to the colonies and is used by beekeepers and observers alike.

Our honey bees are invaluable to the tree, wildflower and other plant life throughout Mt. Pleasant. They are largely responsible for the beauty of our the John L. Clark Honors Garden and help keep our community gardeners happy with beautiful flowers and plentiful vegetables.

As significantly, the honey bee colonies are an important part of our environmental education programs. They give children and adults an opportunity to see working honey bees "up close and personal" and are an illustrative teaching point about the importance of pollinators to plant life and ultimately the food on our tables.

I know that some folks may be opposed to passage of this bill because of public safety concerns. Last year over 4200 school children visited Mt. Pleasant for field trips as part of our environmental programs developed for elementary and middle school students. We also had over 2000 people attend our public outdoor events and enjoy walking our grounds and trails. I am happy to say that we had no reports of honey bee stings from any of these folks. Further, I am unaware any of our

community garden participants who have given up their plots because of having to work in close proximity to the honey bees that pollinate the garden's plants. As a final note, our groundskeepers who mow the trail which passes within a few feet of the colonies have never reported a problem of swarming or stings because of their activities.

Bee stings which have been reported to us are attributable to wasps and yellow jackets. As we all know, these bees build their nests just about anywhere.

In short, our experience has been that honeybees pose no threat to our visitors or staff.

While the apiary at Mt. Pleasant is not directly impacted, the Conservancy strongly supports passage of this bill based on the following:

1. It has been our experience that honey bees are passive insects that do not pose a significant safety threat to the public.
2. Honey bees are a critical link to plant life cycles and ultimately the food on our tables. In fact, 80% of our fruits and vegetables are pollinated by honey bees.
3. Apiaries should be encouraged and facilitated - not restricted - regardless of their location in the County.
4. Failure to pass this bill is contrary to Howard County's stated efforts to promote sound environmental practices and sends a mixed message to our children. On the other hand, passage of this bill gives the County an opportunity to "walk the walk" and not just "talk the talk" on this important environmental issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of this bill and we look forward to your favorable vote on it. We invite you to visit Mt. Pleasant - walk our grounds, see our bees at work and to enjoy the fruits of their labor!